

Saskia Epstein:

Welcome to PNC C-Speak, The Language of Executives. I'm Saskia Epstein, senior Vice President at PNC Bank in New England, alongside my co-host Carolyn Jones, market President and publisher of the Boston Business Journal.

Carolyn Jones:

Thanks, Saskia. It's great to be with you on PNC C-Speak. Each podcast features local executives talking about relevant and timely business topics. In this series, we're featuring leaders named among the Boston Business Journal's Power 50 Movement makers.

Saskia Epstein:

We're here today with Manny Lopes, Executive Vice President, public markets and government relations at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts. Welcome, Manny.

Manny Lopes:

Thanks, and it's great to be here.

Carolyn Jones:

Manny, it's great to have you join us today. We really look forward to a great conversation. So I'd love to start out by having you share with us some of your personal story because it's so fascinating, and how that story connects to the work that you do today. You grew up in East Boston and then you lived and worked there, leading the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, the largest community health center in Massachusetts, and one of the largest in the US and then recently joined Blue Cross Blue Shield. So tell us about that journey. Talk about it.

Manny Lopes:

Yeah. Thanks Carolyn. I think my journey is very similar to many executives where it wasn't necessarily a straight line. I started at East Boston Neighborhood Health Center right out of high school, first year in college, really as a part-time gig to help my single mom pay the bills and put some money in my pocket. And I didn't realize that it was going to be a journey and a career for me. Just being introduced to some incredible people, the founder and Chief Medical Officer of East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, Jim Taylor, working directly for him as a research assistant. And then really having the opportunity to work in human resources operations, IT and then for the president and CEO. When I felt like it was time to spread my wings a little bit, I decided to join the world of consulting and helped with a startup out of Silicon Valley.

So did quite a bit of traveling and learned what the rest of the world was doing well and what they weren't doing so well. And then decided to come back home. I never really left Boston. Let me just make that clear. Boston was my base. And then I came back to the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center as CIO. And shortly after the president decided it was time to really do some succession planning with the board and they decided that that I would be the ideal candidate for that. So again, just grateful and thankful, but definitely not a straight line.

Carolyn Jones:

They're lucky that you decided to keep in East Boston for that journey. For sure.

Saskia Epstein:

And Manny, share with us a little bit about your work at Blue Cross Blue Shield.

Manny Lopes:

It's exciting to be here after about 10 years as President and CEO of East Boston Neighborhood Health Center. I thought it was number one, an opportunity to give someone else a chance and get some fresh eyes on a great organization where we accomplished some great things. And I served on the board here at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts for a number of years, and I had a very close relationship with Andrew Dreyfus. So timing just worked out well that Andrew really gave me a call and said, what are you thinking about in terms of your next career move? We have an opportunity here and I would love to have you come off the board and join part of management, which doesn't happen that often. But I was excited with the opportunity.

Again, good timing from in terms of what we accomplished at East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, and a great opportunity to join an organization that's just been doing some fabulous work in the community, been an innovative company and come work directly with Andrew and his executive team. So today I oversee public markets, which includes the Medicare program and government relations.

Saskia Epstein:

So throughout your career in East Boston and now in the state, and it sounds like in other states as well at various points, you have done a lot of work in the area of health equity and innovation. And I understand that that's a passion of yours. Share with us a little bit more about that work.

Manny Lopes:

Well first it begins with lived the experience growing up in East Boston, raised by a single mom. We were faced with many of the challenges that low income, under resource communities are faced with. Whether that was challenges accessing healthcare or challenges putting food on the table or meeting ends. And again, I've been blessed and fortunate enough to have people who have tapped me on the shoulders and given me opportunities and given me the resources to succeed. And I feel like it's my responsibility now to make sure that I can try to do the same thing or try to address some of those challenges and some of those barriers within these communities. So everyone really could be the best that they possibly can be and could achieve all the goals that they want to achieve.

And some of that in some of these communities, particularly those who have challenges, whether it's transportation, education and housing or of course healthcare, I think there's a role for us as executives in Boston, in Massachusetts, in the entire country to really take a hard look at what can we do to open up more doors to reduce some of those barriers. To give more resources to some of these individuals and hopefully create a more equitable system for all.

In creating Community Care Cooperative, which today is one of the most successful accountable care organizations in the state. And it's being recognized nationwide. I won't get into the specifics around the accountable care organizations for those listeners who are not in the healthcare world. But just to say, this is a group of healthcare providers who decided to come together to really help make sure people are getting the best care at the right place, at the right cost. So really those three items that we're trying to achieve. Community Care Cooperative came together as a co-founder, we brought together community health centers who were really based in these communities where a lot of great work is happening and a lot more work needs to happen. And it gave community health centers the ability to sit in that driver's seat. We have unbelievable institutions here in the city and in our state, healthcare

institutions specifically. But sometimes we do need those who are closest to the pain being part of the solution.

And we thought community health centers were the right players in this moment within the Medicaid program to come together, form this new entity and begin to better manage care and hopefully reduce the cost of care. Not only for the Medicaid members, but also for the state and our taxpayers. And the company has done extremely well now with 23 health centers as part of this group, saving millions of dollars, again, for the state and looking at health indicators that show significant improvement in the overall health of the Medicaid population. And that's why it's getting a lot of national recognition with Christina Severin as the president and CEO.

Carolyn Jones:

Manny, so talking about health equity and healthcare in general, how do you see the future in that space? What lies ahead? And then secondly, how can we as the business community help to change things, help the work that you all are doing in the health equity space?

Manny Lopes:

Well, I'm a glass half full type of guy. I like to believe particularly in our state here, that we can do great things here. And we have done great things, particularly in healthcare. We look at Chapter 56, which provided universal coverage. The first in the country to provide universal coverage for healthcare. The second chapter of that was chapter 224, that addressed cost and quality. Because we knew, okay, we provided coverage, now is time for us to address the cost and quality because we still had challenges in both of those areas. And we still have a lot of work to do.

What I'm really excited about is we have an opportunity, particularly with the business community to come together and say, okay, the next chapter in this story needs to be health equity. It's really important to us for our neighbors, our families, our colleagues to have a productive workforce, a productive society. Of course health is the main driver of that. And so I'm really excited about the health equity compact, which is a group of black and brown leaders who have come together in the healthcare space. Over 50 of us who have come together and are putting together a policy priorities for the next administration and maybe even the one beyond that to say, here are the things that I think we can tackle. Here's the things that we come together just like we came together with universal coverage, we came together on cost and quality. We would like to align the business community around this and everyone else to say, we need to tackle these. Governance, social determinants of health, things that we know will improve and close the healthcare gap for black women, for underserved communities, and in general black and brown communities.

Saskia Epstein:

Manny, if you were to look inside of a crystal ball and predict, what are some of the innovations that you think we'll see the healthcare industry and the adjacent sort of spaces. Health tech, life sciences have been so rapidly evolving. I'm really curious as an inside view what you could illuminate for our listeners about what might lie ahead.

Manny Lopes:

I think there's a lot of space here. And we've seen some innovative companies in Massachusetts, in Boston, nationally, and as well as globally. I think everyone realizes that there's a lot of work here, there's significant room for improvement. We have an incredible healthcare system here and we have

the best and brightest providers and teams working on some of the most challenging healthcare issues. But there's still room here for us to come together, maybe look at just even our systems, our administrative systems. Some of the burden that we place on payers and providers and how can we streamline the process. In healthcare sometimes we're always looking at the financial sector and looking at what they've done, particularly the fact that you can take your ATM card today and be anywhere in the world, put it in, take out money if you have it. Or the ATM won't dispense money if you don't have it.

We don't have that type of system in healthcare today. And I think that creates a significant amount of waste. It makes the healthcare system more risky or more dangerous for individuals by not knowing prior health conditions or not having access to an individual's health record. So I think there's significant opportunity. And again, I am hopeful that we will solve these problems and make it better for everyone. And when I say better for everyone, of course it's always about the patient and making sure they get what they need when they need it in the right place, right time. But we also have to think about the workforce because as we know, they've been the heroes during this pandemic. And I think there's a lot here that we can do to help them be more efficient, effective, and really feel good about the work that they're doing every day.

Saskia Epstein:

And continue to make it an attractive field that attracts and trains and develops talent.

Carolyn Jones:

So Manny, we would love to talk a little bit more about you personally. And if we did a word cloud based on your growth on your background, what word describing you do you think would be written in the largest boldest type?

Manny Lopes:

I think the word that would best describe me would be openness. And I think about openness in terms of people, positions and process. Being open with people and always giving people the benefit of the doubt, giving them again, the tools and resources they need to succeed. When I think about positions, I think about my own experience and being open to new positions and new opportunities. And don't be afraid to take on risk just personally and jumping into a situation and challenging myself. And then being open to new processes within an organization. I know people like to say that if it's not broke, don't fix it. I like to add another clause to that, but even if it's not broke, there's an opportunity to make it better.

Carolyn Jones:

I love that.

Manny Lopes:

Sometimes we have to build on our strengths. It's easy to sometimes build on those strengths than to... You've always got to fix something that's broken, of course, but it's much harder to sometimes close the gaps in terms of where you're weak than building on those strengths.

Carolyn Jones:

That's perfect. And especially in healthcare, you've got to always be looking for how can you do it better. I guess, in any part of life.

Saskia Epstein:

And I'd say, Manny, since you were nominated as a Power 50 movement maker last year, also in your word cloud is movement maker. What can you tell us about what helps drive some of the philosophy and guiding principles that you have as a leader? That have paved the way for you to lead a movement in your career and in your personal life? Share with us some of the best advice you've gotten and that you might offer to others.

Manny Lopes:

First of all, let's look at that word. I love that phrase. The phrase movement maker, because it really means to make things happen. And I get excited when you can really move things forward. It means taking a step forward. It means taking a risk. It means being bold. And I'll go back to the word around openness. It's openness to yourself and being vulnerable. Being open to learning from others, and then again, being open to taking action. So when I think of movement makers, that's the first thing that comes to mind for me is the step forward and taking action. One of my mentors who was Jack Cradock, former president and CEO of East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, who I succeeded, reminded me one day that successful people are passionate about their work and successful people have a fire in their belly.

For me, I think that's what I look for when I'm looking for someone to join our team, someone who has passion and fire in the belly. I think that one quality really helps individuals achieve what hopefully you're looking to achieve as an individual, as a team, as a company. But it also helps you get through those challenging times where you're just having that bad day or that project didn't go as well as you were expected or that initiative, it didn't achieve the results that you were looking to achieve. I think that fire in the belly doesn't allow you to quit. It allows you to continue to move forward. So I would say that was the best advice I had received.

Carolyn Jones:

Manny, you've done so much for our community. I wonder if you could share some of the things that you are most proud of?

Manny Lopes:

There have been many that I'm just really proud of. And I'm proud of some of those accomplishments because it was really bringing an organization together to accomplish some of the most challenging issues that our communities was faced with. So the first thing that comes to mind, of course, is early in the pandemic when we were really struggling to really understand what this virus is and the impact that it would have in our community. And I remember coming into the office and said, the only tool we had in our toolbox at that point was testing. And I said, we have to get this out in our communities as quickly as possible. And in fact, the first group of individuals that need to be tested because we need them helping us care for these individuals who are starting to get sick by the coronavirus, are our frontline workers and our first responders.

So we opened up East Boston Neighborhood Health Center in partnership with the city and other great partners within the community. We opened up the first large testing site at Suffolk Downs. And I think that was just an incredible moment. It was pouring rain the day we opened up. The cars were lining up, it was a drive-through testing system. And to watch the team at East Boston Neighborhood Health Center come together and put something together that no one had a playbook on. No one knew how this was going to work and watch the mayor at the time, give us some of the resources. Tents,

generators, some things that we needed. And then to watch the flow of cars and people coming through and getting tested for those who needed to be tested and then giving them instructions in terms of if they can, they need to isolate.

I think that was just a proud moment for me. So that was number one. I would also recall when the vaccine was available. Again, I watched the team at East Boston Neighborhood Health Center really come together and I really challenged them and said, we need to get shots in people's arms as quickly as we can. And as you recall, East Boston, Chelsea, Revere and even Everett were the hardest hit. Chelsea the hardest hit communities. And in one week we opened up four vaccination sites. And if you recall, the state was working on the big, I called it the hub and spoke. Gillette, Fenway and working with the state and working with the governor and Secretary Sudders, I gave them a call and said, listen, I have a different idea and plan for a more regional localized plan. I need vaccines and I need some resources.

They sent vaccines, they sent members of the National Guard and said, go. And we opened up four sites, Chelsea, East Boston, South End, Revere. And we brought four sites in live and we partnered with the community and said, let's get shots in people's arms. And that was just again, an incredible moment to watch the team. This is when I say for the community, by the community. These are individuals, 50% of our staff lived in the community. They knew how important this was. So people didn't mind coming in on weekends, coming in at night, doing the setup, doing what we needed to do to get these sites up and running. Wonderland Ballroom. We transferred the old Wonderland Ballroom, for those of us who remember, into one of the largest of the four vaccination sites. And that could not have happened if people didn't have that fire in the belly, weren't passionate about the work, and felt the responsibility for that community because they were part of that community.

Carolyn Jones:

Such important work. Curious about your advice, your thoughts for the C-Suite. Not only current leaders, folks who are leading companies in other industries and also really those rising leaders. We are all interconnected in so many ways. And what lessons translate? What advice would you give to them as you look at both health equity space, but really leadership in general?

Manny Lopes:

For leaders in general, I think it's all about how we treat each other. I know we're going through some significant challenges here in this country. And I think politically, socially, and I think as executives of any business, I think it's up to us to lead by example and treat the old golden rule. I know sometimes I don't think it gets used enough where treat others how you want to be treated. And I think as executives, we have an opportunity and we have a responsibility to be mentors, to be that example and take that responsibility and be proud of it and do it with the pride. So think about how you talk to someone, your tone, how you relate to individuals, because we're all here trying to do the same thing. We're all trying to be healthy, productive, and trying to achieve goals, personal, professional, et cetera, and we need each other.

So I think for the C-Suite, that's my message back to them. The second message I would say for the C-Suite is as it relates to health equity, get involved, understand why this is such an important issue. And take this challenging opportunity that we're faced with, whether it's the workforce, whether it's healthcare costs, et cetera. And let's take this opportunity to really change the system. Not only just fix it, but change it so it works well for everybody.

And I think the business community, again, has a responsibility here. And quite frankly, most of the residents of Massachusetts and the country get their health insurance from employee sponsored

insurance. So companies are actually paying. Right? They pay Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts to cover their employees. So they have skin in this game. And I think they should require that their employees get the healthcare that they need when they need it. Mine and body. And we know mine is so important part of this equation as we're finally connecting the mind back to the body and saying, when we talk about health, we're talking about the mind as well.

Saskia Epstein:

That's actually a nice segue because mindfulness and taking care of one's mental health often involves balance and care outside of work. And you're in a serious business and demanding role. So what do you do for fun?

Manny Lopes:

What do I do for fun? Spend time with my family. I love my family, my boys, my wife. We just have a great time together. We enjoy each other's company. And again, I'm just blessed to have a supportive family and extended family, brothers, sisters, et cetera. I love to golf. I'm not that good at it, but continue to work at that. And I love music for those who know me really well. I won't say I'm a good dancer, but I am a good listener and I love music.

Saskia Epstein:

Do you play an instrument, Manny?

Manny Lopes:

Unfortunately, I don't. Again, growing up in the city single mom, we didn't have the opportunity. And organizations like Zumix, that is an amazing performing arts center in East Boston today, didn't exist when I was a kid. But I had other ways to really try to fulfill my passion and love for music that we could talk about at some point.

Saskia Epstein:

All great musicians need listeners.

Manny Lopes:

Yeah.

Saskia Epstein:

Well, this is our rapid fire close if you are getting the hint of it. So we have a few more questions off the top of your head. What's something people might not know about you?

Manny Lopes:

Okay, I'm going to tie it back to music then. I was a DJ for 10 years and I opened up my own company at the age of 16, Euphonic DJ Sound. And did that successfully and DJ'ed at some of Boston's biggest nightclubs.

Carolyn Jones:

Wow.

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Saskia Epstein:

That's so great. This is probably pre-internet, right? So we can't Google and see some-

Manny Lopes:

I hope not.

Saskia Epstein:

... So you were named, we've talked about this, as a Power 50 movement maker. The BBJ has already named the 2022 Power 50 movement makers. Who were you hoping would make that list or who would you nominate for next year?

Manny Lopes:

First, it was a great honor to be nominated last year. This year's list is incredible. But as you heard, I am a believer in team sports, so I'm going to answer that question by saying our frontline workers. Our heroes throughout this pandemic who really showed up to work, helped us get to work, helped care for our loved ones when they were sick and helped put food on our table. So I'm going to nominate all frontline workers.

Carolyn Jones:

Love it.

Saskia Epstein:

That's great. Best moment in Boston.

Manny Lopes:

Best moment in Boston. Backstage with Prince and the Revolution.

Saskia Epstein:

Oh, that is.

Carolyn Jones:

Wow.

Saskia Epstein:

That's a good one.

Manny Lopes:

And I have a second one. I guess. Could I cheat and do two?

Saskia Epstein:

Yeah.

Manny Lopes:

On the Duck Boat with Tom Brady celebrating the 2019 Super Bowl victory.

Saskia Epstein:

Oh yeah. That's one of my top Boston moments was riding the Duck Boat is after the World Series win.

Manny Lopes:

Great.

Saskia Epstein:

And seeing the city like that is really extraordinary.

Manny Lopes:

It's incredible. I have incredible videos. But to also be on Blue Cross Blue Shield, I was on the board who sponsored the boat and asked me if I was interested in being part of the parade. And then when I show up, they told me I was going to be on the Tom Brady boat. My son and I. So I have a selfie today that Tom Brady actually took himself because I was so nervous when I asked him.

Saskia Epstein:

Oh, that's so neat.

Manny Lopes:

I couldn't get the camera straight. So he grabbed my phone and said let me do it.

Carolyn Jones:

That's awesome.

Saskia Epstein:

You got to experience a lot of love that our city has for him, right?

Manny Lopes:

Yes. It was incredible, incredible.

Saskia Epstein:

Tough to top those two moments. But let's think of a collective wish for Boston. Maybe we don't all get to ride on the Duck boats, but what's your wish for the city, for our future?

Manny Lopes:

Yeah. My wish for the city, state and the country is that this pandemic will finally come to an end. But just as important as that is, we come out on the other side a healthier, stronger, and more equitable city, state and country.

Saskia Epstein:

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Well, thank you so much for joining us, Manny. It's been really terrific talking with you. And we loved hearing a little bit about your work and your life.

Manny Lopes:

Thank you for the opportunity.

Carolyn Jones:

Thank you, Manny, so much. That was terrific. We really appreciate it.

Saskia Epstein:

And that wraps up another episode. Thank you so much for joining us, Manny, and for sharing your insight. I'm Saskia Epstein.

Carolyn Jones:

I'm Carolyn Jones. And this is PNC C-Speak, The Language Of Executives. Our guest today was Manny Lopes, Executive Vice President public markets and government relations for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts.

Saskia Epstein:

You can find C-Speak at bizjournals.com/boston or on any of your favorite podcast platforms. Until next time.

Carolyn Jones:

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